



INTERNATIONAL ● REVIEW

Art in America

**JAMES
WELLING**

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FEBRUARY*11 \$9.00





IN THE STUDIO

JAMES WELLING

WITH STEEL STILLMAN

THE PHOTOGRAPHER JAMES WELLING makes images that take time to understand. His pictures fit familiar categories: still life, landscape, architectural images, abstraction, color studies and photograms. But look again—Welling's images are more layered with history and deadpan ambiguity than any hasty glance could reveal. With a career dating back to the mid-1970s, Welling has produced more than 35 distinct series; he pursues several at a time, over periods of years. The history of photography is a regular touchstone. Like William Fox Talbot, Welling uses a diverse range of subject matter to represent a contemporary world suffused by a lingering, sometimes vestigial, past. He has photographed handwriting, drapery, gelatin, railroads, buildings by H.H. Richardson, the New England landscape of his own childhood, European cities and factories, and his current front yard. Meanwhile, he has conducted a small encyclopedia's worth of darkroom experiments. Welling is a classicist and a post-conceptualist all in one, marrying faith in art's emotional power to an ironist's self-aware skepticism.

Born in 1951 in Hartford, Conn., Welling grew up in nearby Simsbury. He attended Carnegie Mellon University and earned a BFA and an MFA from California Institute of the Arts [Cal Arts], where he studied with John Baldessari, among others. In his 1974 thesis show, he presented collages of Marlboro and other cigarette ads that prefigure Richard Prince's appropriated images made some years later. Welling's first efforts were in painting, collage and video, but since 1976 he has centered on photography, a medium he learned on his own. He moved to New York in 1978, and began exhibiting there in the early '80s, garnering significant attention for images of crumpled aluminum foil that conjured up nocturnal landscapes.

Welling left New York in 1995, when he returned to California to head the photography division of UCLA's art department. His work has influenced many younger photographers, and has been featured in dozens of solo and group shows in museums and galleries across the U.S., Europe and Japan, among them Documenta IX in Kassel in 1992. Welling's work appeared in "The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2009. He was one of several artists selected to augment the exhibition, as his work was not part of Douglas Crimp's original 1977 "Pictures" show, which inspired the Met exhibition. Welling's recent project, "Glass House," based on photos he took at Philip Johnson's Connecticut retreat, is on view at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts through Mar. 6, and a related book will be published by Damiani Editore this spring. In April a solo exhibition of new work opens at Maureen Paley in London.

Befitting an artist who operates on multiple fronts, Welling has a studio at UCLA and work spaces dispersed throughout a sunlit house in Westwood (which he shares with his filmmaker wife, Jane Weinstock), where one room is given over to an enormous inkjet printer. We spoke one afternoon last November, sitting at his dining room table.

James Welling in his studio, 2010.
Photo Lisa Ohlweiler.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
"James Welling: Glass House" at
the Minneapolis Institute of Arts,
through Mar. 6.

STEEL STILLMAN Being an artist seems to have run in your family.

JAMES WELLING One of my grandfathers was a very serious Sunday painter who had studied with the American Impressionist Wilson Irvine in Old Lyme, Connecticut, in the 1920s. He had two sons: my uncle became an artist specializing in line drawings, and my father worked for a printing company that did projects for the

Whitney Museum. In fact, a catalogue that my father's firm printed for a 20th-century survey exhibition at the Whitney was my first exposure to modern art.

I started taking art classes in junior high and began painting seriously in 1965—Andrew Wyeth, Edward Hopper and Charles Burchfield were my role models. Eventually I discovered contemporary art by reading *Newsweek* and, in high school, *Artforum*.

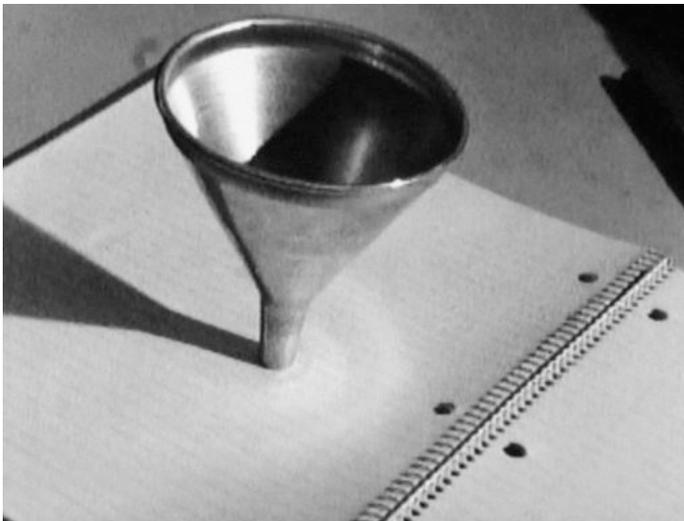
then, at Cal Arts, with lots of free time and access to free equipment, I began working with video, using a studio deck and an early Portapak. I quickly made friends with Matt Mullican and David Salle, who were doing the same thing.

SS One of your tapes from that era, *Middle Video* [1972-73], is a series of 2- or 3-minute close-ups of your hands holding objects for examination, in shadowy black and white.

JW I'd been feeling homesick and had brought back to California a slew of objects—letters, books, linen napkins and other old things from my family's house in Connecticut. Partly under the influence of Robert Lowell, I decided to use the newest form of image-making to look at very old things. The tape opens with an image of a funnel spinning, and then hands pick it up and rotate it carefully in front of the lens. I remember showing *Middle Video* to Dan Graham, who suggested I look at Marcel Broodthaers's work, because Broodthaers also had an antiquarian's sensibility.

SS Though the family relics evoke a sense of history, the play of light and shadow and the tightly controlled frame suggest formal concerns, and remind me of early Peter Campus videos, in which one is always aware of the artist watching his actions on an off-screen monitor.

JW The equipment was too big to take outside, so I was learning how to make something happen in a studio, moving the light around during shots and trying to create a formal vocabulary. I was aware of Campus's work but had never actually seen it. Ironically, much of what I knew of other artists' video work came from reading descriptions in catalogues and looking at stills. One video that I did see, and



Left, *Middle Video*, 1972-73, video, 32 minutes. Courtesy the artist.

Below, *August 16b*, 1980, from "Aluminum Foil," gelatin silver print, 4¾ by 3⅞ inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

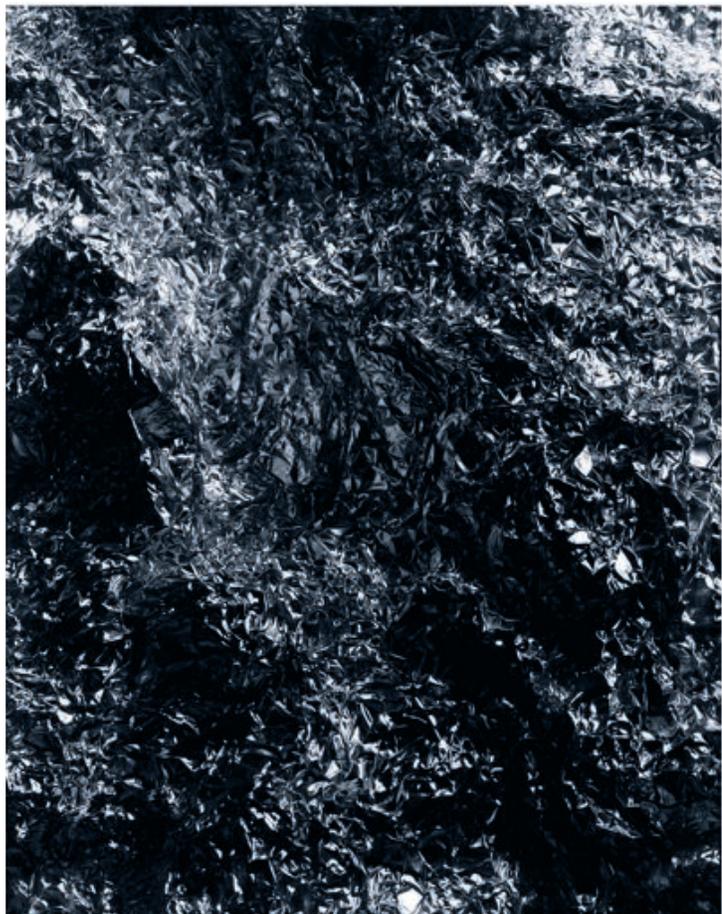
Opposite, *LA-C 27*, 1977, from "Los Angeles Architecture and Portraits," gelatin silver print, 4⅝ by 3¾ inches. Centre Pompidou, Paris.

SS Were you set on becoming an artist when you went off to Carnegie Mellon?

JW Yes. I was keen to figure out what the most contemporary kind of artwork was and to start doing it. In my first year, I studied with the second-generation Abstract Expressionist painter Gandy Brodie. In my second year, I studied with two younger artists, John Stevenson and Robert Tharsing, who exposed me to Minimal and Post-Minimal art. Pittsburgh was a lively art city in 1970-71: the Carnegie Museum of Art presented its International in 1970, Stan Brakhage was shooting his Pittsburgh trilogy, and Merce Cunningham spent a week at CMU that changed my life. I began studying modern dance, and took an interest in John Cage and in electronic music. But when it became clear that my two favorite teachers would not be back the following year, I applied to Cal Arts and was accepted.

SS What was Cal Arts like?

JW I was surprised by how little instruction went on there. Baldessari was on sabbatical when I arrived, so I spent my first semester studying with Wolfgang Stoerchle, who taught a video art class. At Carnegie Mellon I'd made some Super 8 films, and had gone to Anthology Film Archives in New York to see the work of Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton and others. But



which made a strong impression, was Terry Fox's *Children's Tapes* [1974], in which Fox performs experiments with ordinary household objects.

SS How did your teachers react to this work?

JW I remember showing video pieces to Joan Jonas and William Wegman, but I don't think I presented them in class, and I don't think Baldessari ever saw them. I spent most of my time working alone: making videos, reading art magazines in the library and dreaming of becoming a structural filmmaker. These experiences were important. Using a large, boxy video camera on a tripod turned out to be excellent preparation for working with a view camera; and, unconsciously, my early video investigations evolved into the work I've done ever since.

SS You've often said that Paul Strand's work influenced your shift toward photography.

JW I encountered Strand's "The Mexican Portfolio" in the Cal Arts library and was immediately struck by his work. Strand photographed old things and made dark, mysterious prints, which seemed, refreshingly, to contradict contemporary art's preoccupation with the here and now. Having grown up in New England, where the past still resonates, I wasn't sure I had much to say about the present. When I discovered that Hollis Frampton, whose work and writings I admired, was also interested in Strand, I knew I was onto something. But after graduating from Cal Arts, I was still confused about what kind of work to do. Seeing my frustration, Matt Mullican suggested I get a camera like the one Ansel Adams used—an idea so conservative it felt radical. It took me months to figure out that I needed a 4-by-5-inch view camera; in the meantime, I made a camera out of a cardboard box and began teaching myself to process sheet film.

Learning to operate with a 4-by-5 camera was a defining experience. The view camera, I discovered, was a time machine, producing pictures that could have been made anytime in the prior 135 years. By the end of 1976, I had essentially stopped making other kinds of work, except for occasional watercolors when I couldn't afford film.

SS Just before you fully committed to photography you made a group of photographs of your hands.

JW I made "Hands" in 1975. A friend had a darkroom, and I made them on the spur of the moment. Making photograms felt almost forbidden—like something an



“art photographer” might do—but I was intrigued by the results. Among other things, “Hands” seemed to reference Baldessari’s use of hands in his work to direct the viewer’s attention. In my case, the hands were more like a magician’s—casting shadows or staging photographs.

SS Some of your first images with the 4-by-5 were of Los Angeles architecture. What led you to photograph buildings at night?

JW It’s easier to see through the camera’s ground glass at night, and I liked the secrecy—you don’t draw attention to yourself. But mainly, I liked the small dark pictures of illuminated lamps and apartment buildings that resulted. I’d strap my camera to the back of my bike and ride around Santa Monica, thinking that the lit-up buildings looked

like theater sets—they were almost photographs already. I kept remembering Moholy-Nagy’s notion that the city at night expresses unconscious creativity.

SS In 1977 you embarked on a quite different series, “Diary/Landscape,” which paired black-and-white contact prints of an 1840 diary with mostly landscape photographs you shot in Connecticut.

JW I’d started reading Mallarmé, who believed that everything exists to end up in a book, and I was fascinated by books and by photographs of handwriting. Then, on a trip to Connecticut, I found a travel diary that had belonged to my great-great-grandmother, dating from the year after photography’s invention. The handwriting was beautiful, and there were little objects and flowers placed inside like miniature still lifes. No one had looked at it in a hundred years.

“I ENJOY OPERATING BETWEEN REPRESENTATION AND ABSTRACTION, CREATING CONDITIONS WHERE YOU DON’T REALLY KNOW WHAT YOU’RE LOOKING AT.”

SS Subtle correspondences exist between your Connecticut ancestor’s text and the more contemporary landscape views—an arcing of time, weather and human history.

JW When I returned to L.A., I decided to put the two sets of images together, connecting the shallow space of the handwritten past to the deeper space of the present. Of course, the landscapes aren’t explicitly contemporary—I was photographing a darker, more Gothic or emotional vision of America.

SS Yet your images don’t feel nostalgic.

JW Film directors make period movies all the time, though it’s a genre that barely exists in photography. I’m interested in things that reflect their origins. Photography itself does that, with its optical system that refers back to the Renaissance. My fascination with the 19th century is rooted in the same impulse—the 1800s were a dry run for the 20th century.

SS I remember seeing your series “Aluminum Foil” at Metro Pictures in New York in 1981. How did you arrive at aluminum foil?

JW Before I left L.A. I’d tried making abstract photographs with shampoo and sand but nothing worked. Then one day in New York, I came home from my job—I was cooking in a restaurant—and noticed that some foil I’d wrapped butter in looked like a miniature armor helmet. A few days later, I folded up sheets of aluminum foil and began photographing them, and continued to do so for the next three months. It was a very exciting time.

SS They are often described as abstractions, but they’re not exactly. Though remarkably evocative, they can also look utterly like foil.

JW The first prints I made were lighter and more literal. But when I printed them darker, the foil became more associative; they reminded me of a passage from Virgil in which a silvery tree rises up out of the earth. When I was working on “Aluminum Foil,” my friend Jack Goldstein had just finished his film *The Jump* and Troy Brauntuch was doing drawings of spotlights, so representations of visual spectacle were not far from my mind.

SS As the foil pictures were being exhibited, you began work on the first of several series of drapery pictures—close-ups of folded cloth, some of them sprinkled with phyllo dough crumbs.

JW A lot of my work is intuitive and comes from just trying different things. With the money from the sale of my first aluminum foil photograph, I bought a wooden 8-by-10 camera and started photographing draped cloth. At the same time I was also photographing crumpled shards of dry phyllo dough. Without much premeditation, I combined the two, and sprinkled dough on the draped cloth. Against the dark fabric, the dough suggested, perhaps, torn book pages from the diary I’d photographed, or geological debris fallen from above.

SS Even in images without the phyllo dough, the folded fabric provokes multiple associations—from stage curtains to veils to a photographer’s black focusing cloth.

JW Between 1980 and 1985 I worked on four bodies of work in which the nominal subjects could be seen as stand-ins for

other things in the world; in addition to foil and drapery, I photographed gelatin and plastic tiles. I enjoy operating between representation and abstraction, creating conditions where you don’t really know what you’re looking at. Like Wallace Stevens, I want my work to resist the intelligence as long as possible.

SS In 1987, you returned to documentary projects. What prompted “Railroad Photographs” [1987-94]?

JW I’d been doing abstract work since 1980, and I wanted to take photographs out in the world, away from the studio. I’d just made a group of black-and-white paintings and photographs for a show at Feature, in Chicago. Then, on my way there on the train, it suddenly dawned on me that railroads could be a subject. I’d been fascinated by trains since childhood, but I found further inspiration in a series of industrial photographs of trains that I’d



seen in the mid-'70s. Several of these featured a "wedge shot," a staged photograph in which the train appears to be approaching the camera on an angle, but is, in fact, standing still.

I began by photographing railroad vistas and rights of way, and during the next seven years photographed trains all over the East Coast. I came to think of embankments, bridges and rails as land art, a form of 19th-century sculpture that reshaped American landscapes and culture. That said, there is plenty of evidence that my pictures were made in the 20th century—there are no steam locomotives, for instance; though "Railroad Photographs" show 19th-century technology still being used.

SS Ulrich Loock [deputy director of Museu Serralves], writing about your work, compared the railroad's industrialized appropriation of real space to photography's industrialized appropriation of pictorial space. Were you making that connection?

JW I was certainly thinking about how the introduction of the railroad changed perceptions of time and space. But there was something more basic in my attraction to railroads: to me, they were an almost terrifying subject that looked great in black and white.

SS In the '90s you worked on several projects in Europe. One of the first was "Usines de Dentelle/Calais Lace Factories" [1993].

JW In 1988, I was having a show at Galerie Philip Nelson, in Lyon, where weaving is an important industry. In the late '80s, people were beginning to use home computers, and I was excited by the idea that the computer's antecedent was the Jacquard loom, which was controlled by punch cards. I asked Nelson to help me find a lace factory to photograph in, and eventually I was invited to factories in Calais. The production spaces, and the beautiful machinery, reminded me of the printing plants I'd visited with my father. I loved the fact that such heavy industrial equipment could make something as light and sensual as lace.

SS Your travels in Europe also led to "Light Sources" [1992-2001], which, in terms of subject matter, is your most varied series of images. Paradoxically, darkness is a theme—even the daytime images have a day-for-night quality.

JW I wanted to make a body of photographs that was less narrowly defined



than everything else I'd worked on. And I wanted to address my experiences in Belgium, where I'd spent a lot of time, but still felt a little alien. Though later I took pictures for this series in the U.S., most of the important early photographs in "Light Sources" come from wandering around Antwerp and Brussels, not really knowing where I was or what I was looking at.

SS In addition to lights and lamps of all kinds, you shot buildings, landscapes, people, still-life subjects, even a horse: is "Light Sources," in its diversity, a microcosm of your work as a whole?

JW The mise en abyme aspect of this series is something I've understood more

Above, *I*, 1988, from "Polaroid Drapes," Polacolor ER Print, 24 by 20 inches. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.

Opposite, *In Search of . . .*, 1981, from "Drapery Photographs," gelatin silver print, 18 by 14 inches. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

in hindsight. My work is varied—I don't just do one thing—and "Light Sources" is a group of photographs that is about not doing one thing.

SS Since 1986, complementing your projects out in the world, you've made at least seven groups of photograms. The first of these, "Degrades," are all about color. They are mostly vertical images, divided horizontally into two color zones.

JW I'd been doing some occasional work as a commercial photographer in 1986,

and became interested in the graduated color backdrops that are sometimes used as backgrounds for portraits or still lifes. The first "Degrades" were actually 20-by-24-inch Polaroids of printed backdrops, but I soon discovered I could create the same color effects more easily and dramatically in the darkroom, using a color enlarger and a piece of cardboard for burning and dodging.

SS Another photogram series, the starkly black-and-white "New

Abstractions," begun in 1998, seems to be about structure and form.

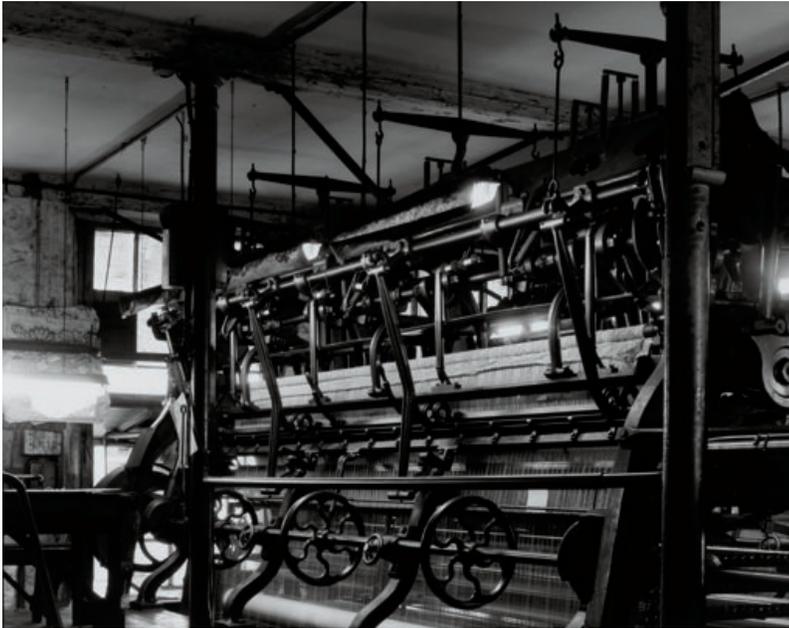
JW I'd noticed a haphazard pile of paper strips in my studio, and decided to use them for a photogram on high-contrast 8-by-10-inch film. Because of the various widths of the paper strips, and because many of them extended beyond the image's border, the result was visually complex and implied, among other things, an architectural structure or a musical score. A few days later I made several more photograms, but soon realized I could make them more directly by scanning paper strips and making digital negatives.

SS Both "Degrades" and "New Abstractions" seem to reference modernist painting—say Rothko for the former, and Kelly or Kline for the latter. Is that just a coincidence?

JW When I work on photograms, I'm in the dark and can't see what I'm doing. For "Degrades" and "New Abstractions," I was more focused on chance or randomness than I was on modernist painting.

SS In 2005 you made "Hexachromes," a series of color photographs in which each image is the result of six exposures.

JW I decided to peel apart the layers of the three-color processes that determine how our eyes—and all photographic media—register color. My aim was to show *seeing*. With my 4-by-5 camera, I made six exposures on a single sheet of color film of agave plants in our front yard, using a different color filter for each exposure—red, green and blue; plus cyan, magenta and yellow. It was a sunny, windy day with shadows whipping back and

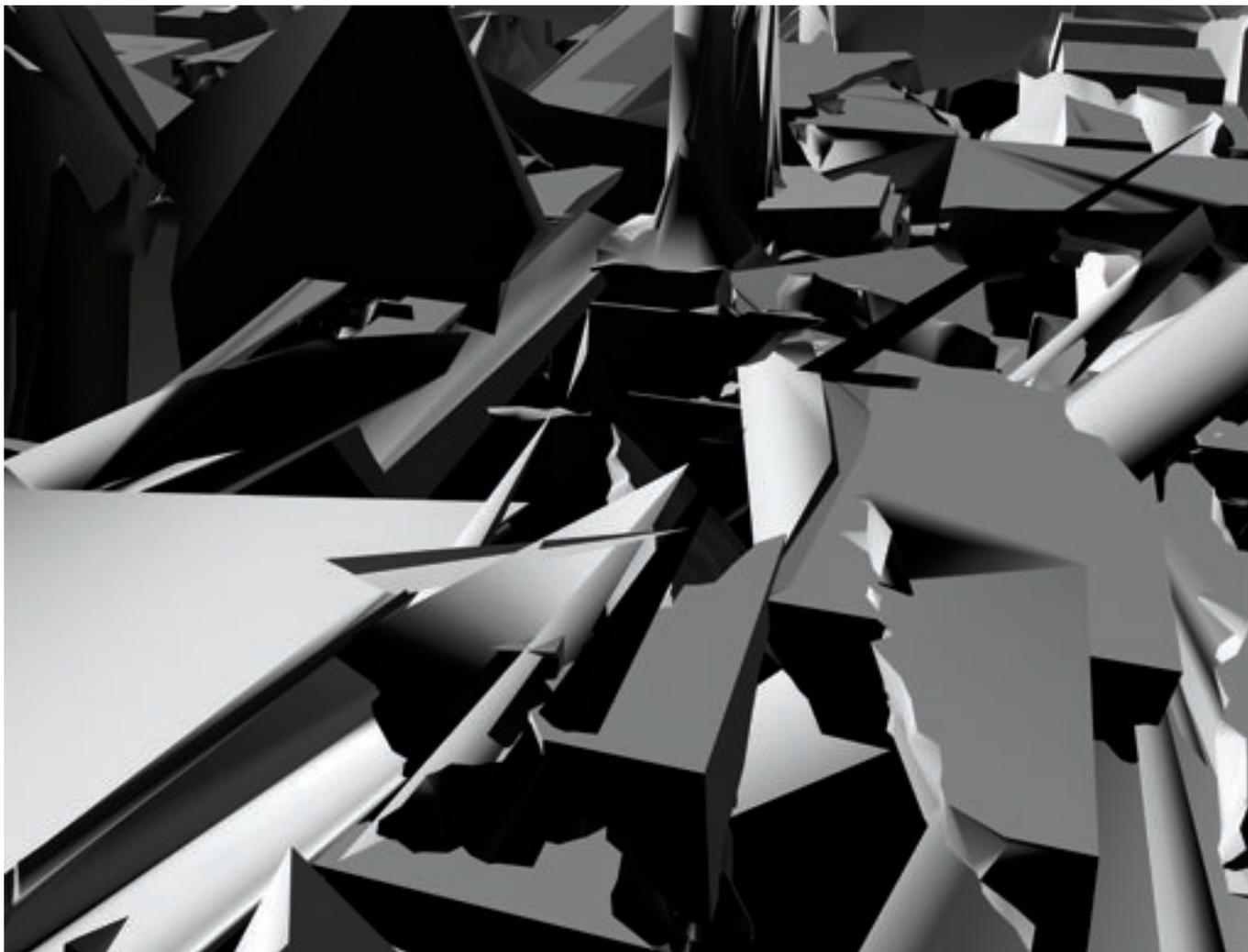


Above, *Leavers Loom*, 1993, from "Usines de Dentelle/Calais Lace Factories," gelatin silver print, 12¾ by 15¼ inches. Courtesy the artist.

Right, *0818*, 2006, from "Glass House," inkjet print, 33½ by 50½ inches. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.

Opposite, *War*, 2005, inkjet print, 23½ by 30 inches. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.





forth. Everything that remained stationary registered in normal color; but anything that moved—shadows or leaves—took on the color of whichever filter was in front of the camera during that exposure.

SS “Hexachromes” prefigures another color project, “Glass House” [2006-09], in which your seemingly contrary inclinations—to document and to invent—come together in a single body of work.

JW I’d already photographed Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House when I approached *New York* magazine about photographing Philip Johnson’s Glass House, which was soon to open to the public. Most of the images that appeared in *New York* [in the May 13, 2007, issue] were made on my second visit there—when I decided to work digitally, in order to move more easily, and to see the results more quickly, than I could with film. At that point I became hooked and went back as often as I could. Shooting the Glass House was something of a performance: I worked holding an array

of color filters and diffusers in one hand while firing the camera with the other. Though the images look like they were done in Photoshop, very little of what you see in the photographs was added later.

SS The ones I like best are full of reflections, underscoring Johnson’s having dematerialized the modernist box.

JW Though I’ve sometimes referred to the Glass House as a lens in a landscape, the truth is I saw it more as a structure to hang my color experiments on, with my filters reiterating the curtains inside. I wanted to make a photographic metaphor for the experience of being on the site; when you’re there, the house is always an amazing focal point.

SS Let’s talk about “War” [2005], a series of computer-generated images that intimate real-world destruction, and darkly evoke the real-world spaces we spend ever more time in.

JW I wanted to make a body of work about the bombings and destruc-

tion that were so pervasive in Iraq in 2005. With the help of an assistant who knew the software, I began to experiment with a 3-D program called Maya. With the computer, we created 64 cubelike shapes, arranged them on a grid, like a city block, and smashed nearly half of them. I then flew through this exploded landscape with the mouse, took frame grabs and made a series of black-and-white prints. As with the foil and drapery pictures, I was less focused on what these images were of than on what they called to mind.

SS You once said that a photograph records the thing in front of it and the conditions of its making. What did you mean?

JW There is a narrative behind every image. I often imagine being able to see the photographer standing behind the camera, or perhaps crouching or running with it. Even an ugly, abject photograph bears the record of its making. When I was at Cal Arts, my

ambition was to create dense objects, works in which many lines of thought converge. That is still my goal. ○

STEEL STILLMAN is an artist and writer based in New York.